

**TITLE: OPENING UP THE WORLD OF  
THINGS WITH SCULPTURE.**

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Submitted in the fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Masters (Fine Arts) by Research  
University of Tasmania

(JANUARY 2002)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project develops an alternative understanding of what art is or can be. Martin Heidegger's writings on art have led this investigation of how the art work functions as an object and what that might mean from a philosophical point of view.

Heidegger's positioning of ontology over epistemology provides an alternative account to the dominant Western paradigm which valorises knowledge. I have developed sculptures which address the issue of *being* rather than communication. The works function to create openings, placing the being of the thing into question.

I have chosen to work with simple trade processes to construct skeletal, airy sculptures that describe a central empty space. The objects I have made are constructed containers that employ structural elements that are bent and held under tension. These bent elements are contrasted with straight linear sections. Most of the sculptures sit upon a curved base that renders them unstable. This instability allows the potential for real motion and also lends the works an air of fragility.

I have developed ways to build stable curved structures, using either salvaged or new wood as my main material. The reasons for this are pragmatic and relate to availability, structural integrity and weight, and personal taste. Other materials such as metal and fabric have been employed,

usually for pragmatic structural ends but also to add to the functional aesthetic.

The project has established a position for the work that sits between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The aim has been to create sculptures with affinities to objects with which we are familiar so that the viewer almost 'knows' what it is. Then, because of the ultimately ambiguous nature of the thing created, he or she is left wondering what it is.

By raising questions regarding knowledge, truth and being, it is my intention to make manifest to the viewer, as they contemplate the sculptures, the unresolved tension that continues to exist between the disciplines of ontology and epistemology.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Tasmanian School of Art at Hobart, The University of Tasmania, the technical staff in the wood and metal shops, academic staff, fellow students, CAST, The Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens at Hobart, Professor Jeff Malpas, Maria Kunda and AJ Davies for their assistance in the completion of this project.

## CONTENTS

Part One: The Sculptural Thing and Our Relationship  
with it.

Part Two: Martin Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of  
Art."

Part Three: Old Media - Coopering and the Outmoded

Part Four: How The Work Progressed.

Part Five: Context of the Work.

Richard Deacon and Meaning

Anish Kapoor and Emptiness

Martin Puryear and Skilful Making

Dennis Oppenheim and Titles

Simone Mangos and Poetic Space

Conclusion

Bibliography

Note: All images by Colin Langridge except where  
otherwise noted.

## **PART ONE**

### **The Sculptural Thing and our Relationship with it**

The present body of work questions the usual or normal relationship we have with things, and with art objects in particular.<sup>1</sup> The works are sculptural objects constructed using familiar materials and techniques. The sculptures generally have a functional form; they resemble functional things in my local environment. The works employ various means of physical tension achieved through bending wooden elements in a repetitive process around a central empty space. The essential reference here is the traditional form of the coopered cask (or barrel).

I attempted to avoid the symbolic in favour of the real in the work. One of the prime issues considered in the philosophical writing of Martin Heidegger which informs this project is ontological truth, or the truth of Being.

The kind of truth under consideration is not the most familiar form of truth: truth as correspondence. This notion refers to a neat correspondence between observation and utterance or statement. It is truth within the sphere of knowledge. By contrast, I am concerned with the category of ontological truth: truth as Being. These philosophical concerns will be developed in the next chapter.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Newman addresses what he sees to be a flaw in Heidegger's desire for art to reveal the truth of Being. He says that artworks, because we know they are artworks, can only ever reveal the truth of the being of artworks and never the truth of Being.

I have made the present body of work with the hope of exciting in those who view it a consideration of how they relate to the world. The project is based on an assumption – fuelled by my reading of Heidegger – that we are currently deluded on this issue<sup>2</sup>.

Heidegger finds that Being consists of things that are both revealed and concealed to us as humans – because only we can conceive of being in relation to us. It is this issue that leads us to forget the truth of the Being of things, which is partly an unconcealed being within the sphere of human knowledge. Perhaps the greater part is the concealed being: outside the sphere of our knowledge. The concealed being of things is inconceivable to us. Our drive to power encourages us to draw things into our sphere of knowledge, which is bounded by the extent of our language and experience. However, we can resist the drive to power through knowledge and follow instead the drive to ontological truth. We can, if it pleases us, accept that being is not – and can never be – wholly revealed to the human mind which usually only relates to being from its own position of self interest. According to Heidegger, we are deluded into believing that the world we know is the world.

In making this body of work, it was my intention for the works to remain in their actual presence, against our desire to transform them by appropriating them to our sphere of knowledge and power through the means of metaphor, symbolism or information. The objects are relatively fragile, unstable and resistant to appropriation as sources of

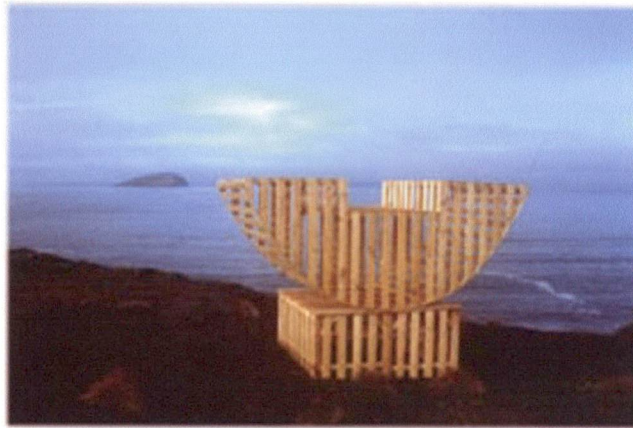
<sup>2</sup> Heidegger 1977

knowledge. They tend to be uniform, at least within separate sections, and they employ a repetitive serial structure around a central axis. The figurative tradition within sculpture generally allows for viewers to project themselves into the works and empathise with the human concerns expressed. I am interested in making sculptures that resist figuration by reminding the viewer of prosaic functional objects such as packing crates. Thus any projection of the viewer into the sculptures will result in an empathy with the emptiness of ordinary things.

The empty centres in my sculptures are the only intentional symbolic or metaphoric element. This feature can refer to the empty centre of things stripped of our cultural or humanist projections. In general I have sought to resist surface-based illusions or the representation of things other than the objects themselves.

I chose to employ familiar materials such as wood, metal and fabric and to work with them in recognisable ways. I wanted to set up a tension between understanding the elements of a thing and not understanding the whole thing. I aimed to create a condition for engagement by appealing to a sense of familiarity, but hoped that this familiarity would wane on further scrutiny. I wanted to seduce the viewer into engaging with the work through a sense of knowability, but for this engagement to engender a sense of unfamiliarity and unknowability, and ultimately a moment of acceptance of the unknown.

It is my belief that this moment of acceptance can only be accomplished via this interchange between the known and the unknown. I wanted to avoid a situation where the object would appear totally incomprehensible at first. For example, a maze of computer chips and electronic wiring may have the effect of seeming alien or too complex, and thus the question of being would not come into play. To raise a sense of questioning, the thing must appear as almost knowable; as on the edge of the mundane or the rational, and then lead toward a realisation of unknowing, rather than foreclosing this potential prematurely.



***Device to Raise Doubt. 2001***

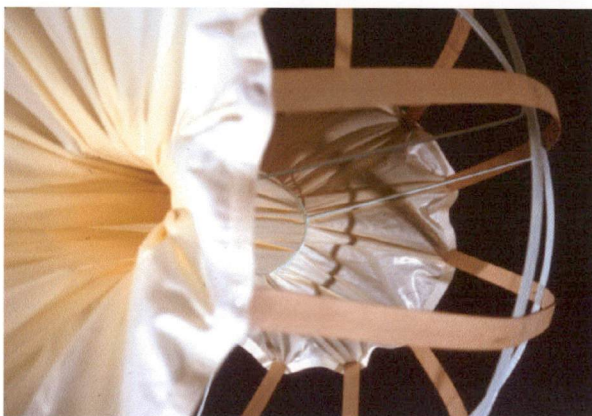
**H.2m.W.3m.D.1.5m Salvage timber.**

The *Device to Raise Doubt* is an example of how I attempted to make an object that rests within the liminal space between knowledge and ignorance. The shape of the upper section of the *Device* rocks on the bottom section creating a similarity with the motion of a boat. This is strengthened by the proximity of the ocean and the horizon line. But it is constructed from slats of salvaged packing crate pine which resemble many of the rural structures on the Tasman Peninsular where the work was sited. The materials, the open slats, and the flat faces of the *Device*



work against a potential boat reading, and this sets up a state of confusion in which the viewer is left in doubt about the meaning and purpose of the object.

The art produced as a result of this enquiry seeks to awaken an insight into the nature of the truth of being. The work attempts to achieve its aim through a resistance to being appropriated as knowledge. The project does not seek to destroy or abolish knowledge; rather it was the aim to momentarily displace it from its seat of prominence in favour of truth.



***Device to Suck Attention.* 2001**

**H.1.5m.W.2m.D.1.5m. Salvage timber, painted steel, Satin Jacquard.**

The *Device to Suck Attention* was the first piece where the title drove the design of the work. The sculpture functions to draw the attention of the viewer into the central empty space. The idea was that people would first approach the work and look into it, then they would read the title. If this happened then they would have experienced the work as the thing that it is, in advance of knowing what it is. (This amounts to saying that if the viewer did look at the object, and into the centre of it, the object would have been experienced *as itself* – ontologically – before being

experienced epistemologically. This distinction will be made clear in the following section on Heidegger).

The tension in the bent wooden elements injects potential energy into the object and this allows for the possibility for real rather than symbolic action. There is a small element of danger and fragility in the design. This is usually focused on the relationship between the bent curve and the straight floor or wall. This can serve to encourage a sense of care toward the object. People are careful not disturb it too much because it may spring apart or fall over. This careful attitude assists in raising the questioning of Being through bringing about a heightened sense of our relationship with the thing.

The objects in this series of works are generally human in scale; that is, they are neither small enough to be considered models nor large enough to be monuments. They are at this scale because it is our relationship with normal or usual things that is in question. The objects are constructed using relatively simple techniques that remind one of small scale manufacturing industries, particularly recently outdated ones such as coopering and wooden boat building.

The physical products of these industries are still around us but the skills and tools are steadily disappearing – for example the last cooper at the Cascade Brewery retired over 25 years ago. The intense labour and the special skills and tools required to produce precision coopered steam bent wooden objects renders them at odds with current technologies. They contain an anachronistic element in

their very manufacture and thus call into question their own existence and potentially their difference from what is current.

It was my intention to call in to question what is current, popular, valued and considered normal or usual in the belief that there is a problem with our recent western culture. This problem resides essentially in the projection of our self-interest onto other things, including people, resulting in their reduction to a resource for our consumption. This Heidegger calls 'enframing', but it can be more generally considered as Humanism. It appears to be an inevitable activity, but may be specific to our current culture, which is based upon the drive to personal power through knowledge. There are alternatives to this type of cultural being, for example Medieval Christianity, Buddhism and Ancient Greek civilisation. Usually these other cultures work to retain an opening to mystery. This often takes the form of a spiritual realm, which is greater than the human realm. While not personally endorsing any form of organised religion it does seem that art can serve to open a poetic place of unresolved contemplation that can prove to be a valuable asset in a culture that has a drive toward closure.

## **PART TWO**

### **Martin Heidegger's 'Origin of the Work of Art'.**

Is a work of art a thing? The answer must be yes, but what kind of thing is it? The question of *Being* is the primary issue in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. The question of Being was asked by Plato but, according to Heidegger, since then it remained unasked until Heidegger himself asked about it again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> I chose to read Heidegger in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of my art practice and also to widen the parameters of how art could be considered.

Heidegger's ontological approach to art provided me with an opportunity to consider an alternative to a received paradigm, *art as communication*; art as primarily a form of language. This must be taken in context of much of the recent history of visual art as taught in the institutions I have attended since 1989. I felt that this paradigm was restrictive but did not know if there was an alternative. The direction my work has taken has been characteristically negative, and I found that philosophy offered some reinforcement for my art practice as a critical position. A philosophical definition of negation does not imply a nihilistic attitude, rather an urge for truth and a process of moving through: "Negation is the very heart of philosophy, because it represents the critical attitude, questioning

<sup>3</sup> Mautner p. 242.

conventional wisdom, questioning the common experience of reality."<sup>4</sup>

Heidegger reacted against the fact that philosophy had been primarily concerned with knowledge or epistemology, which in itself was a worthy issue. However, he saw that it had become the foremost issue and that this was causing philosophers - and by extension everyone in our culture - to overlook the ground upon which knowledge stood: *Being*. In order for us to have knowledge about something it must first *be*, and we must *be* in order to experience it.

Heidegger was interested in what it meant for something to be and how being occurred. According to Heidegger, no one had asked about being for well over 2000 years in our culture, and therefore the very question itself had come to seem absurd. Why should we question what is utterly self-evident? Descartes had asked about how we can know about reality and existence but Heidegger wished to question the nature of existence that precedes knowledge.

There are different kinds of being. Human being Heidegger called *Dasein*. Objects and things in the world have a different kind of being to *Dasein* in that they have properties such as weight and density while we have possibilities. We exist as temporal beings, who are aware of our being in time and who can make decisions as to what we will do with our time. In this sense we are self-creating beings or entities that are continually becoming. By contrast, a rock is a rock and even if it does slowly weather and erode through time, it is not self-aware of its changing

<sup>4</sup> Levin p. 191.

properties. We can observe changes in nature but it is only we humans who can project the knowledge of past and future onto things; these are not properties of the things themselves.

We appear to be largely unaware of our difference from *other* things and this gives rise to our abusive relationship with these other things. Art can provide an opportunity for an awakening out of this deluded relationship. Sculpture seems to be an ideal position from which to consider these issues because of its three dimensional nature. The person who observes an object is doing so in their own immediate physical space and they are therefore implicated in the place and with the being of the thing in the space. In Heidegger's later work, space and place become contentious concepts. He gives place priority over space because space has to do with a mathematical abstraction, whereas place takes into account all of the ways we can relate to things.<sup>5</sup>

Dasein's human knowledge of temporality is a double-edged sword. On one hand we are self-aware individuals gifted with the knowledge of our existence, and on the other hand we know with tragic certainty that one day we will die. As an activity peculiar to human beings art making can be a bridge between Dasein and the being of things. An artwork can be understood as a frozen piece of Dasein. It can be a way for Dasein to know itself. However, this is not why Heidegger believed that art was such an important human activity. He was not interested in art as a form of

<sup>5</sup> The Heideggerian distinction between space and place arises in his later work and may become an issue for my subsequent research.

personal therapy but as a social, even political and historically revealing phenomenon.

As a fundamental way in which beings are revealed, and indeed in which the structure of revealing as such is disclosed, the work of art has an ontological status that cannot be grasped with the usual categories given in substance ontologies. Heidegger insists that we must examine the work of art on its own terms if we are to discern its paradigmatic function for our cultural practices.<sup>6</sup>

In his 1935 essay Heidegger asks, *what is the origin of the work of art?* Usually it is seen to be the artist, but how does the artist become an artist? It is the artwork that makes the artist. Heidegger shows us the circular nature of this way of understanding art. He points out that it is art which is common to artists and artworks but then goes on to ask, *can art be an origin?* Here we see that artists and artworks can also be seen to be the origin of the concept art. This leads him to question how art is present in an actual artwork. He then goes on to reveal a further complication by asking, if we are to discover the essential nature of art by examining artworks, how can we be sure it is an artwork we are examining if we are uncertain about what art is?

Heidegger points out that all artworks have a *thingly* character: even a poem must be vocalised or printed. In his view artworks are things to be moved about, hung or played, but their art nature does not necessarily consist in their thingly qualities. The artwork has an allegorical character. It refers us to something beyond itself, yet it is always tied to its existence as *the thing it is*. For example,

<sup>6</sup> Palmer p. 10.

even though Michaelangelo's David may be an allegory about becoming, it is also always a piece of Carrara marble.

Heidegger explores the relationship between person, work and thing in terms of equipment. He enlists Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant's shoes to illustrate the link between art, work, equipment and thing.<sup>7</sup> (We cannot gain any aesthetic insight from Heidegger's essay because, as he makes clear, he is addressing ontology. The aesthetic approach to art is at odds with Heidegger's understanding).<sup>8</sup>

The being of equipment consists in its usefulness and its reliability. A good piece of equipment sinks below our level of awareness when it is working well. The peasant woman is not aware of her shoes while she works in the field if they are performing their shoe task well. Heidegger says that it is in the painting that we become aware of the *equipment-being* of the shoes. Van Gogh makes evident for us the being of the shoes without us having to wear them. The question arises here, why should we need Van Gogh, and by extension art, to reveal the being of these shoes when we could just as easily look upon a real pair of shoes and see the same thing? I think that Heidegger is focused here upon the *equipment-being* of the shoes which is

<sup>7</sup> A number of commentators have criticised Heidegger for his interpretation of this painting which has been seen as clumsy and insensitive. However, we can overlook this if we understand that he is not attempting an aesthetic appraisal but is rather using the painting as a means to further his argument. See Newman p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> Palmer says, "The aesthetic view of art is firmly entrenched within the subject-object dichotomy that is characteristic of Western metaphysics and prejudices the enquiry into art in terms of its substance ontology and valorising of subject experience, completely overlooking the artwork itself and its unique mode of being in the process". Palmer p. 4.



foremost when they are in use but, ironically, at that time also beneath awareness. Heidegger asserts that art can reveal the being of a thing to us, which in everyday life we are unlikely to notice.

Heidegger emphasised that he is not simply concerned with the imitative function of art: the painting does more than represent a faithful image of a pair of shoes. His concern is with the disclosure of truth, *aletheia*. He reminds us that his contemporaries believed art to be more concerned with beauty, and that truth was seen as more suitably a subject for logic. "Agreement with what *is* has long been taken to be the essence of truth."<sup>9</sup> He is concerned with the idea that art should reveal the truth of being, not simply the truth of image or visual agreement.

To clarify this point further, he considers another example of an art work: that of a Greek temple. What, he asks, is the temple in agreement with? What is it imitating? The answer is, nothing. Another example follows, a poem about a Roman fountain. He points out that the poem reveals to us the truth of the essence of being of the fountain, yet in no way could it be seen as an imitation of a fountain.

The way in which aesthetics views the art work from the outset is dominated by the traditional interpretation of all beings. But the shaking of this accustomed formulation is not the essential point. What matters is a first opening of our vision to the fact that what is workly in the work, equipmental in equipment, and thingly in the thing comes closer to us only when we think the Being of beings.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger 1935 p. 259.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p. 261.

Heidegger repeatedly asks us to consider our preconceptions about the nature of reality and he does this by asking us to become aware of the words and categories we ascribe to things. For instance, when we say, 'that is a thing', we should consider why and how it is a thing. These are all questions of ontology (the study of being).

Heidegger concludes that if we can understand the true nature of being of an entity - and he has chosen to focus on the being of artworks - then we can come closer to an understanding of what *is*. This would be to reveal or disclose the true nature of reality, which is one of the aims of philosophy. Heidegger believes that art and artworks are a special case of being, where the disclosure of truth is an inherent part of the being of those beings: this is why he says that art is truth setting itself to work.

Heidegger's essay pursues the concept of art in order to access its essential being. However, he finds that most artworks are not, and cannot be, accessed on their own terms because they either have foreign categories projected onto them by those who interpret them, or they are displaced - either physically or historically - from their original place or world. To address an artwork as a thing in itself would require it to be encountered outside of all relations. This is never actually possible, but it is a theoretical postulate.

There are two concepts that Heidegger often uses to talk about art: World and Earth. Earth for him is the ground upon and in which things exist, out of which they arise and

fall back into. World is the relational and conceptual existence of things that we experience in terms of categories. It seems that entities arise out of Earth into World through our naming and ordering and forming relationships with them. The World, as in the world of the ancient Greeks, consists of certain relationships to entities. When these relationships change, the World changes. The concept of Earth used here is more than a reduction to substance; it is also sound, energy, and any stuff out of which things arise to become what they are. I suspect that the stuff of earth cannot be named because once this happens, it has risen to World.

Artworks serve to set up the World, and set forth the Earth. They set forth the Earth by drawing attention to the materials they are made out of. This is in contrast to ordinary equipment in which the materials slip from awareness as they are used up in service. For example, the wood that is used for a shovel handle becomes unnoticed while shovelling, the more invisible it becomes the better it serves as a handle. Yet in artworks our attention is drawn to the materials used and to the skilful manipulation of them by the artist. The Earth is by nature unable to be penetrated by analysis. Heidegger says that when we weigh a stone it gives us a measurement but this does not give us access to the stone. If we analyse a colour by measuring its wavelengths, we remove ourselves from the experience of the colour, and have only the results of our calculation. The Earth is undisclosable and when it is set forth as such, as self-secluding, then we appreciate its being.

In opposition to this is the World, which is self-disclosing. The World is the knowledge and understanding of a people. The being of a World consists in uncovering the secluded to bring it forth into the open as an addition to the store of knowledge. Thus a struggle ensues between the secluding Earth and the disclosing World; each entwined in the other. In his search for Being, Heidegger investigates the nature of the being of Earth and World and thus uncovers a dynamic relationship occurring at all times, in all places and yet beneath our awareness.

Heidegger writes about Truth, what it is and how it is established. He comes to the conclusion that in our World we conceive of truth as correctness of the representation of fact. The problem is; how can we recognise fact? He refers to the term *unconcealedness* as the form of truth he is interested in, which in turn refers to the ancient Greek term *aletheia*: the unconcealedness of beings. It seems that we presuppose or take for granted that beings are already unconcealed as we experience them, and herein lies the error. Beings are always partly concealed and partly unconcealed to us. If we believe we are witnessing the factual truth of a being when we examine it, in order to ascertain the truth of our representation (which could be a verbal description of the thing), we are mistaken. Mistaken because we have become deluded into thinking that we have access to the truth of being. The Humanist conceit for Heidegger is that we ignore the limits of our knowledge and understanding. One of the redemptive qualities of art in our culture is that we believe we do not fully understand it, and therefore we are open to it.

According to Heidegger, we can say with confidence that beings *are*. A thing stands before us and we can see that it *is*: it exists; that aspect is unconcealed. Concealment marks the limits of our knowledge of the thing. For example, we can only ever view a three dimensional object from a certain position which will always leave the other side in shadow. The implication in Heidegger is that if there was no concealment we would know everything. There would be nothing to discover, nothing would be forgotten or remembered and there would be no interest or anticipation.

For Heidegger, it is in the interplay between opposites that truth happens: between concealedness-unconcealedness, closing-opening, earth-world, untruth and truth. The struggle between Earth and World brings Truth into the *open*. Truth is not correctness, which deals only with the known. The open is a clearing in which a thing, *this* particular thing, is able to be seen both in its nature as dumb Earth and knowable World.

Artworks are unusual in the sense that they make manifest the truth of their being which is usually not manifest.

It is due to art's poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual. By virtue of the projected sketch set into the work of the unconcealedness of what is, which casts itself toward us, everything ordinary and hitherto existing becomes an unbeing. This unbeing has lost the capacity to give and keep being as measure.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger 1935 p. 278.

One of the ways Heidegger explains the emergence of truth is to contrast the making of craft with the making of art. (Since his essay was first delivered there has been a shifting of these boundaries, but if we think of the word craft as he intended it, as the making of functional equipment, then we may sidestep the historical and political dilemma). In craft the material, the object and the process of its making are dismissed in favour of its use.

In art the material, the object and the process of its making are highlighted and are part of the being of the work. We are aware with works of art that they have been created, whereas with other things we tend to just use them to do things. Poetic use of language leaves the concealed and the unconcealed intact by its ambiguous uttering. The sculptor Richard Deacon uses titles to confuse the relationship between thing (art) and word. He does this by using phrases that are relatively common but seemingly have no obvious meaningful relationship with the sculpture. However they are never completely ridiculous always appearing to almost make sense. I believe he does this in order to place the being of the thing in question.

Poetry becomes for Heidegger the essential artistic act in that it gives us access to the unsayable as it hovers on the boundary between sense and nonsense "Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their being *from out* of their being." <sup>12</sup> Normal use of

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger 1935 p. 279.

language focuses only on the unconcealed, which it defines and clarifies.

Both Earth and World are human concepts, and so Heidegger is pointing to Humanism as a flawed relationship with Being. It is the *technological* understanding inherent in Humanism that he sees as posing problems for clarity of understanding of the true nature of Being. Heidegger suggests that all ages have their own way of relating to Being, and that our age has adopted a technological understanding. We interpret things as resources for our current or future use. This technological understanding is so pervasive that we are in danger of forgetting the question of Being and of accepting the World, as we interpret it, to be the ultimate reality. In Heidegger's view, the question of Being needs to be kept open. Here the saving power of art comes forth as a means of revealing Being. In art the struggle between Earth and World becomes apparent and the way in which we understand things is uncovered, where elsewhere it is always concealed beneath the Humanist conceit.

### **PART THREE**

#### **OLD MEDIA - COOPERING AND THE OUTMODED**

My engagement with the craft of coopering has a connection with the idea of the *outmoded*, as it was elaborated in surrealism. In surrealism, the outmoded is associated with the marvellous and the uncanny, referred to in the theoretical work of Walter Benjamin, and recently in Hal Foster's writings on surrealism. Both writers argue that the surrealists employed outmoded objects such as mannequins, and Victorian and Art Nouveau architecture as political devices to critique modern capitalist consumerism. In his book *Compulsive Beauty*, Foster develops the concept in some depth. He has this to say on the significance of the surrealists' use of outmoded 'found' objects.

On the one hand, the capitalist outmoded relativizes bourgeois culture, denies its pretence to the natural and the eternal, opens it up to its own history, indeed its own historicity. In effect, it exploits the paradox that this culture, under the spell of commodity, has any history at all. On the other hand, the capitalist outmoded challenges this culture with its own forfeited dreams, tests it against its own compromised values of political emancipation, technological progress, cultural access, and the like. It may even intimate a way to tap the utopian energies trapped in these historical forms – to tap them for other political purposes in the present. Here we might glimpse how this 'substitution of a political for a historical view of the past' might turn cultural destitution into revolutionary nihilism.<sup>13</sup>

The Surrealists used found objects to invoke the outmoded, but I have sought to integrate the outmoded into my psyche through practice. It is the act of actually striving to make a

<sup>13</sup> Foster p. 162.



watertight cask that interested me rather than the image of the cask. There was a precedent to this mode of engagement in a much earlier piece I made, when I chose to hand carve a human figure from stone in order to experience first hand what this type of sculpting was like. The act of becoming rather than representing is important to my practice. There is an empathy that people can form with a hand made object that does not exist for other objects. The logic employed in a coopered cask is evident in the exposed seams and it is the self-projection of the viewer into the position of potential maker that gives the cask its unique presence.

Initially I chose to develop the almost lost skill of coopering as a means to bend wood to create the curved forms I was after. However, after researching coopering and immersing myself in the practice I found that as an activity it reflected many of my theoretical concerns. The fact that coopering has been superseded by mechanisation and the development of metal containers renders it literally outmoded. To develop coopering as a skill and practice it now is anachronistic and potentially subversive of contemporary social mores.

In May 2000 I began to research the prospect of making a wooden cask in the traditional coopered manner. The coopered cask described an empty space: it is obviously designed to be filled with something. It is an object that is familiar to most people, yet very few people know how it is actually made. A repetitive serial technique of construction is used and both the techniques of bending that I have been researching are employed.

There are very few books that describe in useful detail the technique of making a coopered cask. In fact, I discovered only one book in print, Kenneth Kilby's *The Cooper and His Trade*<sup>14</sup>, and I ordered it. Instead of waiting for it to arrive, I began to buy the timber and draw up the plans for the cask. After consulting the wood technician and one of the furniture lecturers I felt I had enough information to begin. The edges of the staves need to be bevelled precisely in order for them to come together and form a watertight seal without using any glue. An intriguing element for me was the fact that a cask contains bends in two directions, horizontal and vertical. The challenge of making each stave and then finally bringing them together with the steel hoops to find them all smoothly fitting and forming a uniform barrel shape was most invigorating.

I searched out and purchased an old hand-plane of the correct length, 14 inches, to cut the bevelled edges on the 32 staves of green Tasmanian oak. The technique of defining the correct angle for the bevel requires that you first draw a full size plan of the finished cask and work from the centre where the cask is widest. By drawing a circle and dividing it by the number of staves you want, you can calculate their width. The more there are, the narrower they are – there is no fixed width or number. You then draw a line from the outside edge of the cask into the centre. This gives you the angle of the bevel. Then the height of the cask allows you to work out the length of the bent staves. Working from the

<sup>14</sup> Kilby.

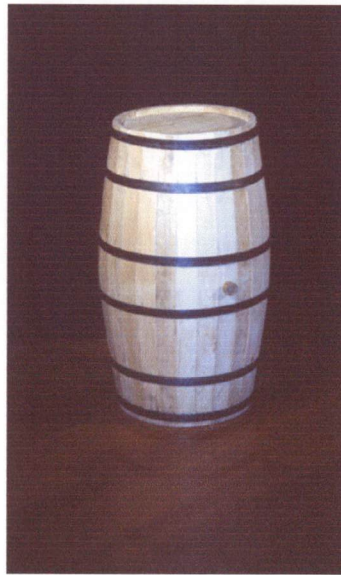
drawing, it is also necessary to determine the width of the middle and ends of each stave. This creates the depth of belly in the cask, making it either tall and slender or short and squat.

After much labouring the staves were all finally ready to be pulled together using the four steel hoops I had made. It was surprisingly difficult to find a way to stand all 32 staves up at the same time to get the first hoop on. At this point they were all straight with tapered ends, so it was possible to use masking tape to hold them all as a unit. I used a metal mallet to gradually drive all four hoops down until they would go no further. Each of the straight staves bent inwards as the hoops tightened and they did come together as a unit. It was very gratifying to see that all my calculations and hand planing had been almost correct. It was possible to see light coming through at about four of the joins, because the angle was not quite right or else I had been clumsy with the plane. I did not make a lid for the cask as I could see that it would not have been watertight.

However, considering that coopers used to spend a minimum of 7 years apprenticeship before they were qualified I felt I had done okay for my first attempt. The experience gave me a sense of great respect for the traditional coopers who could make their casks to hold exact amounts of liquid without any leakage, and they often had to fill large orders quickly. I was under no illusions about my coopering abilities and realised that the true cooper could make a wide variety of vessels each with its own special attributes. The act of undertaking this work

also gave me an appreciation for the hard life people led in past times and the relative ease of the mechanised world.

The act of physically engaging in this research was very rich and I think it had a marked effect on my attitude towards object making. The combination of careful planning and careful making had proved their worth to me.



***Celery Top Pine Cask. 2001***

**H.0.8m. W.0.45m.**

In December 2000 I began working on my second attempt at making a well coopered cask. This one I made out of green celery top pine which was sourced from a specialist timber mill near Huonville. I used only premium quality quarter sawn timber.<sup>15</sup> By this time the book on coopering had arrived and I was far wiser from my earlier attempt. Quarter sawn timber is used for casks because it resists cracking or splitting through the bending process and warps

<sup>15</sup> In quarter sawn timber, the growth rings appear as vertical lines on the end of the plank when it is laid flat.

less after bending. I read up on the history of coopering and picked up useful information by visiting the Cascade Brewery Museum which contains coopers' tools that were in use up until only 25 years ago. It was these that particularly interested me as they were highly specialised and some of the work required in making a cask could not be performed by modern power tools. This is primarily because power tools work off a flat surface while in coopering you are working off a curved surface. The most difficult job to achieve turned out to be cutting the groove at the top and bottom of the cask to take the tapered edge of the round heads. This groove had to be cut on the inside of the assembled cask. I carefully studied photos of coopers performing this task to try and gain some insights as to how it was done.

I decided to make a larger cask than the first one and to use a technique for shaping the staves that was more suited to modern methods. This would prove to be far quicker and more accurate. I cut the staves to length, width and breadth and then steam bent them into shape, over bending to allow for the kickback of the timber. (I made a steaming device for this operation.) The shape of the bend was determined via a full-scale drawing. After each stave was bent and cured it was then passed over the buzzer in the wood shop by hand. This proved to be highly dangerous and required a great deal of care on my part as the buzzer guard had to be held back for the arching curve of the bent stave. I was fortunate to have the wood technician give me a great deal of initial support in this operation until he felt I was able to work unsupervised.

The new technique allowed for far greater control of the bevelled edge and this second cask came together very neatly. I decided to make heads for it, to see if it would hold water. In the end it was the lack of a proper tool, a *croze*, to cut in the head that allowed minor gaps to form where water did eventually leak out. (I had to resort to making a tool out of a cut bolt and a piece of wood.) At this point I felt I could have really done with some advice from an experienced cooper. However after making inquiries it seemed there were no coopers still working in Tasmania. I felt I gained tremendously from the experience and given more time I think I might be able to make a watertight cask next time around.

The hand-coopered cask can only be found as a specialist item these days. Most wine casks are now manufactured using a mechanised process. The truth is that casks have not disappeared so much as coopers. It is the issues of care and time associated with the long tradition of coopering that are raised when trying to make a cask in the traditional manner. Hal Foster uses the example of a wooden peasant spoon of rural France to outline these issues. (The object assumes significance for the surrealist Andre Breton, who bought such a spoon at a flea market).

The spoon is thus an instance of the first order of the surrealist outmoded: a token of a precapitalist relation that commodity exchange has displaced or submerged. Here its recovery might spark a brief profane illumination of a past productive mode, social formation, and a structure of feeling — an uncanny return of a historically repressed moment of direct manufacture, simple barter and personal use. This is not to romanticize

this old economic mode so much as it is to spark a connection between psychic and historical dimensions via a social object – a connection, however private, that might be both critical and curative in the present.<sup>16</sup>

It is the sense of loss that gives the hand coopered cask its significance for me; the loss of a close and caring relationship with objects that we interact with. I cannot claim to know how people of the past related to the objects around them but it is plainly evident in the cask, and other hand made objects, that a considerable amount of time and attention was given to the manufacture of these things. In contrast it appears that presently we may be alienated from the things we interact with by virtue of the displacement of their manufacture and the *off the shelf* mentality of the supermarket. I do not wish to make art that reinforces the mass produced consumer mentality that I associate with speed and convenience.

The skills that developed through learning how to make a cask enabled me to make a number of coopered spheres. These were used as elements for the series of works titled *Hollow Structure to Meet the Wind* that were made for the Bondi Sculpture by the Sea exhibition. I found that people were generally interested in the wooden spheres and that older men, in particular, recognised the necessary labour and skill involved in their manufacture. In terms of the research project this was a successful outcome because people were inquiring into the nature of the objects. They were interested in how they were made, what they were made out of and what their function was in the sculpture.

<sup>16</sup> Foster p.161.

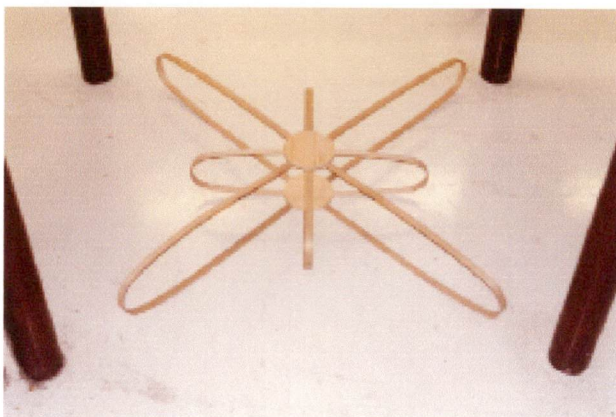
These are all questions of being, even though they seek after knowledge, they are essentially addressed at the thing itself.



## **PART FOUR**

### **How the Work Progressed.**

This section describes the evolution of the entire Masters research project by describing the creative process in the making of nine individual works.



***Steam Bent. 2000***

**H.0.3m.W.2m.D.2m. Wood.**

Early in the course, I made a number of experimental works using inexpensive materials which were not intended to be exhibited, they were simply ways to learn techniques and to orient myself to my research problem. Firstly I hung three coloured pieces of fabric from the air-conditioning duct that runs through my studio. This activity summed up what my thesis was then about: the description of a central empty space. The air coming from the vent made the fabric move gently, and from outside they looked a little like manta rays with their gaping mouths.

Soon I enrolled in the Sculpture by the Sea competition that was to be held in Tasmania early in 2001. I had already become interested in the viewing platforms and walkways

constructed out of treated pine that were to be encountered in the many wilderness parks in Tasmania. I chose to design a piece for the outdoor sculpture show that used these structures as a reference point. What attracted me was the fact that these structures were designed to be occupied by humans and when they were not occupied they were definitely empty. They provided an opportunity for a viewer to project into the finished work, and they were an outdoor structure that was familiar to most.

The first ideas for the Sculpture by the Sea were very directly platform-like, however the safety rail had been broken and the floor was bent straining upwards. These wooden platforms reminded me of the walkways you sometimes find at the beach. I hoped for a sense of danger and the likelihood of narrative with the broken rail.<sup>17</sup> Also, I felt that they conveyed the idea that something broken was hovering between function and non-function. This idea arose from Martin Heidegger's thought that we do not become fully aware of a thing (eg. a hammer) until it is broken.<sup>18</sup> He explains this in detail as the movement from a thing appearing as ready to hand and present to hand. That is, the being of the thing which we use but are not aware of and the being of a thing which we become aware of when it no longer works.

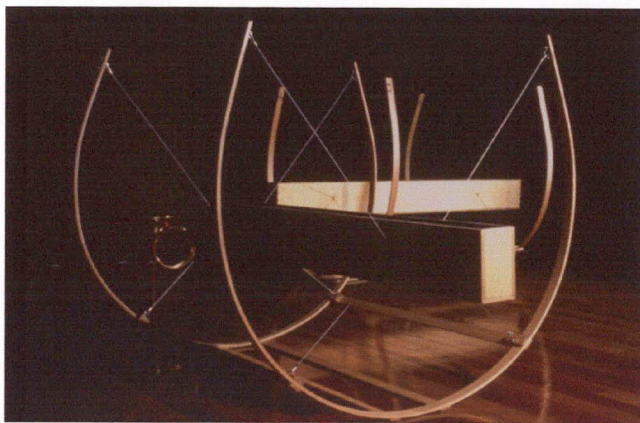
This project was to undergo a number of transformations before being finally resolved.

<sup>17</sup> Later I avoid narrative in my work because it can lead the viewer away from a relationship with the present object.

<sup>18</sup> Palmer p.4

At the same time I became interested in learning how to steam bend timber. I purchased some green structural hardwood and cut it into 4mm thick lengths until I had 8 pieces. These I steamed until they were pliable, which took about 20 minutes each. I then bent them around a mould and clamped them in place until they set. Afterwards the eight lengths were joined in a star shape formed around a central empty space. I used a pine disc as the central joining point. *Steam Bent* was my first attempt at using steam to bend timber. Previously I had only bent timber by cutting it thin and then laminating it around a mould form. I was impressed with the possibilities for making extreme bends using steam and lamination as a combined technique.

In March I was invited to take part in a curated show at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery in Western Australia, November 2000. The show was to be called *Gravitate* and it was to support the opening of the Gravity Discovery Centre, which was an initiative of the Physics Department of the University of Western Australia. The work was expected to refer to the issues relevant to the ongoing attempt of international astrophysicists to detect and measure Cosmic Gravity Waves. In theory, these waves are so subtle that to detect their presence would be like feeling a pin drop on the other side of Australia. As incredible as this sounds, the scientists had spent years developing devices to damp out noise so their delicate instruments could focus in on the gravity waves. Apparently, the ability to detect them would be like turning on the sound of the universe while at present we only have the picture via telescopes.



***Device to Express the Problem of Detecting Cosmic Gravity Waves. 2000***

**H.1.5m.W.3m.D.3m. Wood, Bitumen, Copper, Steel Cable, Brass, Stainless Steel. Image by David Martin**

Initially I wanted to suspend a large sheet of perspex from the ceiling via four cables to the corners so that it almost touched the floor in the centre. This would have been similar to models of the way space bends around the gravitational pull of stars. However I could not find a company that made sheets of perspex the large size required. So next I chose to move my focus from the gravity to the activity of the scientists. It was the delicate and mysterious equipment they were using that became my reference point. The initial design was for two troughs holding water to meet at right angles. This would mirror the shape of the Gravity Discovery Centre and also refer to the gravity waves via the water, which I hoped would respond to vibrations coming through the building. These vibrations were the very ones they were trying so hard to damp out.

The work for the *Gravitate* show had been changed to hang by steel cables from the ceiling while retaining the idea of

the two troughs. By suspending the troughs the idea of the isolated vacuum within the Discovery Centre was heightened. Any vibrations upon the surface of the water would now only be due to very subtle movements via the cable or by someone actually touching them. The ability of the troughs to swing accented the possibility for wave patterns to form, hinting at gravity waves moving through space, and also the delicate and fragile nature of the measuring apparatus. Copper tubes were now to be inserted through the troughs so that the steel cables would not, visually, appear to touch the structure whilst still supporting it. The orange copper tube formed an interesting image contrasted against the black bitumen painted inside the troughs and the varnished marine ply finish outside the troughs. They appeared to have a pragmatic and functional sense about them with a touch of the 19<sup>th</sup> century science invention.

The curator of that show, Robert Cooke, informed me that the work would not be able to hang from the gallery ceiling. Then I hit upon the idea of suspending the troughs from supports via cable, as they had by this time been constructed with that in mind, and I felt it really was a satisfying resolution to how the trough should be presented. So large strips of laminated wood were made to form a cradle. The cables were to be fixed near the top or ends of the semi-circular strips and passed through the copper tubes within the troughs to the other end of the strip. When clasped the weight of the water filled troughs would act to pull the strips in and they would be held hovering in space under tension. The copper tubes connecting the two troughs

would meet in the centre at right angles where a down pipe would terminate in a brass tap which would indicate the point where the scientists would measure the vibrations affecting their laser beams travelling through the vacuum inside their rectilinear structures.

In April I pursued ideas for sculptural works that resembled walking platforms that appeared to run through the walls of the gallery. I wanted to make a work that was suitable for a gallery space and that would interact significantly with that space. The experiences of steam bending had opened my eyes to a multitude of possibilities for sculpture that enclosed space in a round form, using multiple repeated sections in much the same manner as the construction of a wooden boat. The simplicity of this form of construction is almost universal in human societies. Our own rib cage is an example of this structure. This familiar element appealed to my desire to make work that people did not feel alienated from and so I attempted to integrate the platform with the bent form.



***Coopering Platform. 2000***

**H.1.3m.W.1.5m.D.0.5m. Wood.**

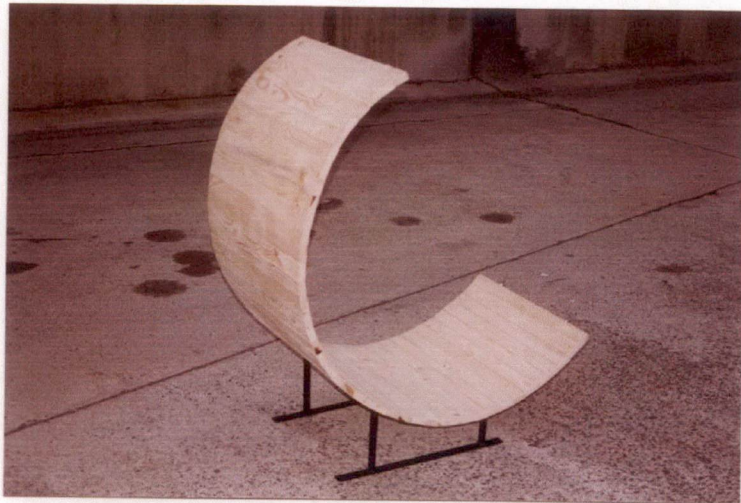
The Sculpture by the Sea piece underwent a transformation and became much taller, lost its rails and became an

inaccessible platform that did have an inviting but very steep ramp. This new design occurred as a result of learning another method of creating bent wooden structures: coopering. This demands that the edges of planks are bevelled precisely, so that when they are brought together a curve forms across the planks rather than along them as steaming does.

For the maquette the technique I used to bring the planks together was to countersink screws into all the planks and tighten them so that they would appear, from the outside, to be suspended in space without support. There was a great deal of labour involved in this method and the drilled holes had to be registered accurately in order for the curved form to come together neatly. I had discovered that these rather minimal forms had to be well constructed, otherwise people focused upon the sloppy manufacture.

I was not entirely happy with the result of that work, particularly as it required a support structure to uphold it. It was not very strong either, as it was pulled together with nothing but two screws for each plank. So in April I designed another piece that curved upwards in a 'C' shape. The screws were discarded for a mild steel rod that had a thread cut at either end to take a nut and washer to pull the planks together. This was a much easier and stronger method. I imagined this piece sitting on the beach with the simple support hidden in the sand. The outcome was a series of planks that would curve and apparently stand up on their own, this added interest to the object and appeared to encourage inquiry.





***C Platform. 2000***

**H.1.2m.W.1m.D.0.4m. Wood, Steel.**

Around this time I was fortunate to have a talk with sculptor/artist Tony Bishop who was visiting the school. I was particularly interested when he thought my aesthetic was too harsh and that I should soften it a little. He also said that my techniques and finish were ordinary and known and that I should look for the unknown and special to make my work more interesting. It was the details that were important in the kind of work I was doing, or at least I should pay more attention to them. I resolved to develop a more professional/trade quality to my work and to look for unusual fabrication techniques.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, I began to question my almost exclusive use of timber, and started to design sculptures that used other materials as well. It was glass, metal and fabric that attracted me but I was too locked in to my current projects

<sup>19</sup> This was at odds with my desire to employ simple and familiar techniques in the work but I understood the work had to also be interesting enough to engage the viewer.



exploring bending techniques for wood to fully exploit those designs.



***A Small Crack in the Big World. 2000***

**H.1m.W.1.8m.D.0.5m. Wood, Steel.**

The next piece I made, *A Small Crack in the Big World* was a more refined version of the 'C' shape. I dispensed with the steel support, and instead the piece ran along the ground as a footpath would, and then steeply curved up like a wave. I employed the same techniques as for the 'C' but made this piece with a much greater degree of precision and understanding of the potential pitfalls. Time was also spent on hiding the nut and washer inside two dummy planks at either end of the work. I nailed four strips of thin Tasmanian Oak to the edges to help unify the structure and enhance the curved line. I was satisfied with this piece and put it in a group show called Lumpen at the Long Gallery - Salamanca Art Centre in June. The title refers to the Heideggerian concept of art creating openings, like poesis, in the closed world of knowledge.

A fellow student and I had earlier in the year put in a proposal for an exhibition at the Entrepot Gallery at the entrance to the School of Art. The show was to be called "*Another Minds Problem*" which referred to the

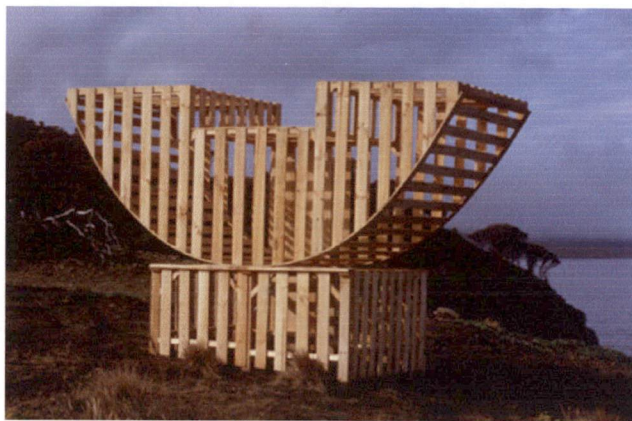
philosophical issue 'the problem of other minds'. This essentially addresses the isolated nature of human consciousness which arises from the apparent fact that we can only ever experience our own consciousness and so can never be certain about what another person is thinking. We also cross referenced the show with the famous essay on the white cubic space of the modern gallery '*Inside the White Cube*' by Brian O'Doherty. Essentially the work consisted of a suspended white cube of soft interfacing material inside of which hung an upside down television. To see the screen the viewer had to bend over and peer through a gap at the bottom of the cube. The image they saw was a view of the gallery showing themselves seen from behind via a small camera mounted in the gallery ceiling. They were seeing themselves as others might see them. We also produced a limited edition of five catalogues each with an individualised container and a small white cube inside. The catalogues were displayed as artworks with titles, dimensions, and price listed alongside.

I continued drawing designs for possible sculptures that used the packing crate as a reference. They were essentially empty wooden structures that employed an interplay of straight lines and curves around an empty centre. At the time, I was looking at books on Australian colonial furniture and buildings and was particularly interested in rural buildings that used planks, which were unadorned and relatively simple. However many structures were of interest including bridges, the wooden pipelines of central Tasmania, boats, and I was still interested in casks. I became attracted to the idea of making a passageway that

people could enter, this led on to the idea of a caravan sized structure. All of these works were intended for the gallery.

In September the designs originated for two pieces that were made later. The final piece for the Sculpture by the Sea show, and another piece called '*Device to Suck Attention*'. I feel that it was around this time that I became more confident with my research and the theory and practice seemed to come together far more strongly than before. After a period of searching and openness I had found a way of translating what interested me into definite and personally satisfying forms. Possibly the work I was doing on the piece for the Gravitare show induced this step forward. The potentials of working in this tradesman-like way became ever more apparent and the experience of intense problem solving for the Gravitare show had lent me confidence. I had gained some insight into the ontological significance of sculptural objects and was steadily increasing my skills and knowledge in working techniques.

During the summer break I set to work on the Sculpture by the Sea piece which was to be titled '*Device to Raise Doubt*', this entailed sourcing discarded packing crates with timber long enough for my purposes. After de-nailing and breaking the crates down the timber was sawn in half lengthways and run through the thicknesser, which effectively doubled the volume of timber and halved the final weight of the sculpture.



***Device to Raise Doubt. 2001 Tasman Peninsular.***

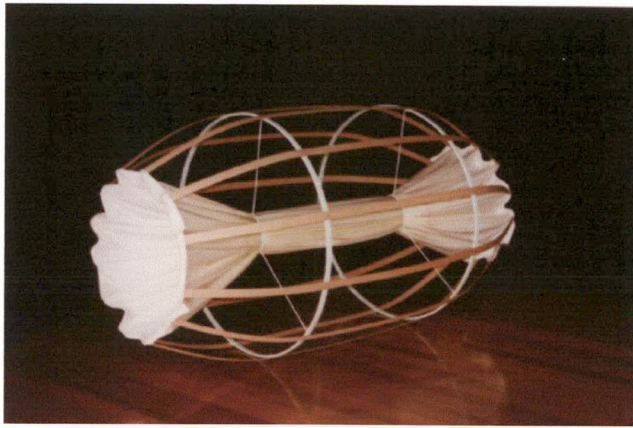
**H.2m.W.3m.D.1.5m. Salvage Timber, Steel.**

Doing accurate drawings again helped, especially when translating straight lines meeting curved edges. From the plan I realised that over 100 metres of timber planking were required for this piece. It was done in stages and sections which were bought together later. Much of the way it was built was worked out during construction and cutting lines were measured off the object rather than to plan. One issue that emerged later was that the use of salvaged timber can lead to the structure being out of square due to warping. Even though I carefully used a square edge to build with the timber itself was not straight and it became almost impossible to keep it square.

After making the structure to my satisfaction it was time to think about the platform on which it would stand. Due to the sloping ground at the outdoor site I wanted to make a platform that would place the rocking structure parallel with the ocean horizon. The photographs that had earlier been taken of the site enabled the correct angle to be achieved. At first the platform was a stark and purely pragmatic structure but, after advice from a fellow student, it too was

dressed with planks to mirror the rocking structure it supported. The advantage of this was that another enclosed space was created.

Over the summer period the *'Device to Suck Attention'* was also completed. A large plank of discarded and used Oregon timber was sliced/ripped into 12 lengths 3mm thick, these were then sanded to a smooth consistent surface. These were screwed to two steel circles that had smaller circles inside them. The circles were made of square tube and solid round mild steel, they were bent by hand around a form and then welded. I chose to paint them with light green enamel but later changed this to a jade green hammer tone paint, which was more resistant to chipping and scratching. A tube was sewn from a pearl coloured material called 'Cuddlesoft Jacquard'. It was satin on the outside and fleecy on the inside. Aesthetic decisions were made regarding the interplay of colours and textures, these were based on a feeling of interior/domestic. I think this was primarily a reaction to the harsh industrial look of *'The Device to Express the Problem of Detecting Cosmic Gravity Waves'*.



***Device to Suck Attention. 2000-2001***

**H.1.5m.W.2m.D.1.5m. Salvage Timber, Painted Steel, Satin Jacquard.**

By January I had begun looking at books on ancient structures. I had found my way into them by researching coopering. It was interesting to find that the trade of coopering had a long and proud history that was very closely aligned with social and environmental issues. Because the coopers always wanted the best quality oak for their wet casks (these are liquid containers, dry casks carried such things as flour and salted herrings), and because casks were the most convenient bulk containers there was a significant impact upon forest regions where oak grew. With the increasing population in Europe and America the demand for casks grew to a peak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The invention of a mechanical means of making casks followed by the invention of metal kegs gradually killed off the once thriving trade, except in the fine wine industry which clung to the taste imparted by the oak. The empty cask became for me a means to remember past lives and consider what may be absent in the present.

A sense of refining the work and of intensifying the sense of tension, mystery, emptiness and the absurd combination of functional/pragmatic means to apparently useless ends now drove the investigation. A large wheel structure, similar to a waterwheel, yet with an off-centre axis seemed promising. At this time the Hobart Wooden Boat Festival was on and I was very much taken with a number of the attractive clinker style boats and little steam driven vessels.

The *'Device to Raise Doubt'* won the Directors award in the Tasman Peninsular Sculpture by the Sea Competition and part of the prize was an invitation to the November exhibition at Bondi. From talking to a number of people at the Tasman Peninsular show I learnt that one of the most positive aspects of my piece was that it was visible for much of the walk trail and that the relationship with the ocean backdrop was very successful. As it happened a heavy gale closed in on the fourth night and destroyed a number of works including mine. I was later able to determine that it was a combination of using Liquid Nails, dry, weak timber and too thin a section through the long curved base plank that led to the breaking apart of the structure.

I resolved once again to focus upon structural concerns, quality of materials and increasing my skill level. I knew that to make the timber heavier and of a better quality would ultimately change the nature of the artwork but that decisions had to be made regarding longevity if I was to make successful outdoor public sculptures. I took these matters into consideration when I began to make designs for the



next outdoor piece for Bondi. I was particularly concerned that this piece would work with and use the wind while remaining strong enough to withstand it. I also wanted the piece to stand tall, to be visible and to have a moving element. Then of course the pragmatic issue of freighting work to Sydney determined that it should pack down.

The first design was of a windmill made of canvas awnings that would be able to fold down. I later changed from this to a set of three wind-socks on poles atop wooden crate like structures. The crates were to refer back to the '*Device to Raise Doubt*', and its history of having been damaged by the wind. However I did not want to make this explicit.

It was while making the work for *Gravitate* that it became apparent I was able to work in a much more focused way if I had the parameters for the work mapped out in advance. This may seem obvious but the original research brief was open enough for me to make almost anything that had a central empty space. This at first seemed a blessing but later showed up to be problematic in that I required some sort of boundaries from within which to make decisions about the work in progress. Thus the words '*Device to ...*' in many of the titles for the work. This enabled me to work from the position of making something to do something. Of course the work that the sculpture did was arbitrary in that I decided what it would be, it was often subtle psychological work upon the viewer.

The initial designs for the wind-socks were that they be suspended from two metre high wooden poles with springs

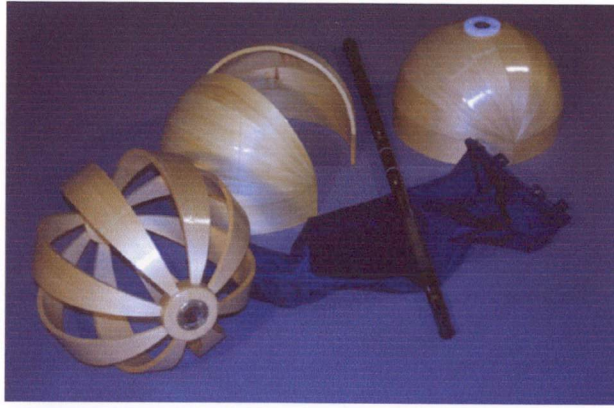


half way up the pole to break the wind strain. The poles were to be attached to a wooden ball atop a square wooden crate. The idea sprung from memories of wind-surfers with their universal joints attaching the mast to the board. Upon technical advice from three different sources it was pointed out that there were a number of mechanical problems with this design. Fundamentally the square wooden crate would be taking all the strain and would have to be very substantial or sunk into the ground. I then decided to try using a flexible fibreglass pole, this would have the additional benefit of making reference to both fishing rods and radio antennas on boats. I was very much aware of the marine environment for the Bondi show and wanted the work to have multiple relevant references to that environment.

I later discovered a telescopic fibreglass fishing rod, the *Shakespeare Wonderpole*, which was seven metres long and had a handy metal ring in place at the tip for attaching the wind-socks. The extra height was a great bonus, it made the work visible from further away and lifted the socks up out of the reach of curious members of the public. The pole would now sit inside a 500mm deep galvanised iron pipe driven into the ground. Over this would sit a solid half sphere of coopered wood on top of which would sit the full wooden ball through which the rods would travel. This would create a situation where the wooden spheres would primarily function to hide the way in which the structure was attached to the ground, however they would somewhat ironically be the most laboured and interesting part of the work. It was important that the entire piece present as a

smooth functional unit that appeared to sit upon the earth with little disruption. The tall and colourful sock being pulled by the strong coastal breeze would appear to be held in place by nothing more than the shallow wooden structure.

All of this was aimed at making the work interesting enough to engage the viewer long enough for them to question the physical nature of the work and hopefully, in that time, allow it to open a train of thought. The title of the work became '*Hollow Structure to Meet the Wind*' parts 1,2 & 3. It seemed that it would work to help viewers come to 'meet' the wind and contemplate its power and changing moods. The coopered wooden structures were made from Celery Top Pine which was steam bent and moulded into a circle shape from which it was later bevelled to enable a smooth spherical form to be fabricated using epoxy glue. These structures were later coated with marine grade gloss varnish to give the look of the hull on a wooden boat. Each of the three wooden structures took approximately a month to make requiring a long and complex process of fabrication by trial and error. Later I learnt how to use a metal lathe to create brass fixings to strengthen the holes through which the rods would pass, this also added to the functional nautical aesthetic.



***Hollow Structure to Meet the Wind. 2001***

**Spheres 0.4 m diameter. Celery Top Pine, Brass, Stainless Steel, Fibreglass, Nylon.**

A friend was able to sew the wind-socks for me out of Rip Stop fabric which is a light nylon. I first chose navy blue but later added red and yellow to make the socks more colourful and in keeping with a beach theme (beach balls, bathers, towels etcetera) and also to refer to signal flags on ships. A great deal of experimenting took place over a period of two months while I had the first pole set up in my back yard. The wind sock kept on getting tangled (mainly because of the whip like flexibility of the rod) and I had to develop a way of securing the whole structure as it would be at the mercy of the public for ten days. In the end I found that to use 300mm long pieces of 100 pound breaking strain nylon coated wire crimped and looped through metal eyelets then attached to a metal clasp, a brass swivel and a metal ring enabled the socks to fly and spin around freely in the strongest gusts. The flexible rods handled the wind easily and dissipated much of the force of the wind.

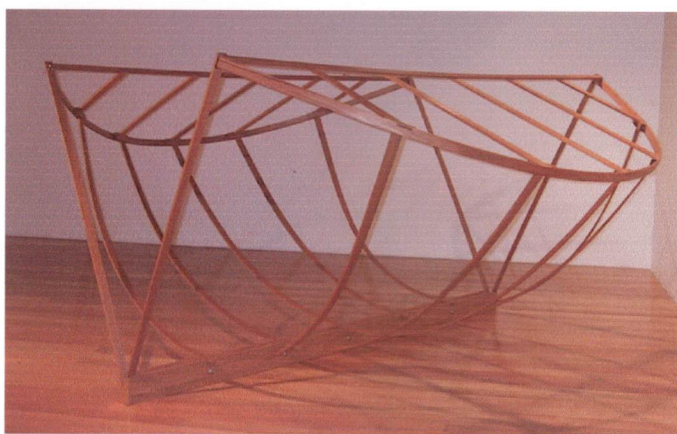


***Hollow Structure to Meet the Wind. 1, 2 & 3. 2001.***

**Bondi. H.6m.W.0.4m.D.0.4m. Celery Top Pine, Steel,  
Brass, Nylon, Fibreglass.**

My supervisors suggested I should resurrect the '*Device to Raise Doubt*' for my final assessment and so I put that on my list of things to do before the end of the year. What interested me now however was a new piece that began as a drawing of a half sphere split down the centre and spread open. This eventually transformed into a skeletal boat like shape, something like a lifeboat with a heavy flat keel that would sit upon the ground/floor and stabilise the whole structure. I particularly liked the lines created by the juxtaposition of the straight and curved wooden slats. The central space was open and inviting one to almost jump in and the sculpture had that air of fragility and poise that tended to imbue it with an emotional intensity and a stillness.

A maquette was constructed out of scrap wooden slats. It was a metre long, 600mm high and a metre wide. The final piece then became three times this scale and I was able to determine how much timber it would require directly off the maquette. I chose to make it in Tasmanian Oak of which I purchased four long planks. These were ripped into a series of 12mm and 6mm wide slats. The wider ones for straight pieces and the thin ones to be bent and laminated into curves of 12mm. It seemed that a 6mm wide slat would be the thickest they could be to form the bends required. If they did not work I would have to reduce them down to three slats at 4mm. The slats were cut to size and their surfaces were finished through the thicknesser.



***Split Thing.* 2002.**

**H.1.8m.W.3m.D3m. Tasmanian Oak, Brass, Iron.**

It seemed best to make the straight pieces first and later bend the curved sections on the straight frames. Long strips of inner tube rubber were used to bind the slats together while the glue set them into the desired curves. These ribs were bent in place on the existing structure rather than on a mould. I found the pressure applied by the bent slats was so great that the structure would now require a support of some kind to join the top sections and stop them from being

ripped apart. I decided to use a black nylon coated wire cable for this purpose.

The slats had to be fixed into position at their ends because they tended to slide along the curved frame. After consideration, screws and bolts were abandoned in favour of a wooden slot into which they would slide securely. Each of these had to be fabricated to conform to the curved surface on which they were glued. This done, the whole structure was sanded back to create a smooth and splinter free surface. Now the wood was treated with linseed oil to protect the glue and give the timber a darker and more uniform colour. I titled this piece *Split Thing*.

I began to source timber for the resurrection of '*The Device to Raise Doubt*' by finding disused packing crates and pallets. These had to be de-nailed and trimmed to meet the requirements of the job. This time I would change the top of the structure so that it was not horizontal but angled. I chose to do this to accentuate the visual appeal of the whole structure particularly the idea that it rocked in the wind. The only problem would be to work out of 90 degrees for those parts of the structure.

I made it stronger this time by using thicker sections of timber and triangular supports. The sculpture was constructed in three sections. This enabled it to be transported more easily and also allowed for each section to have integral strength. The structure was coated with a natural and transparent wood oil to prevent warping and shrinkage. I also hoped this would protect the glued



sections, which were also all fixed with galvanised nails. The internal structural sections were constructed from Tasmanian oak, which is far stronger than pine.

In January 2002 a second version of the *Device to Suck Attention* was constructed. It was an inversion of the former structure in that it had wooden slats on the inside and the fabric on the outside. It was also slightly larger in scale than the earlier piece and asymmetrical. The aim was to investigate how this variation on the same theme would perform as a sculpture, particularly in terms of the interior space which would be tantalisingly visible only through the openings at each end. A sheer fabric at the smaller end was employed to add to the temptation to see inside. This played off the reflective silver satin on the larger section.



***Device to Suck Attention 2. 2002.***

**H.2m.W.2m.D.3m. Tasmanian Oak, Painted steel,  
Satin, Netting.**

The outdoor works were erected at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens in Hobart. This picturesque location would provide a beautiful backdrop for the work but would also provide security. An added bonus would be that the

public would be able to see the work and this was a most gratifying outcome.

The indoor works were installed at CAST in North Hobart. The gallery has a polished Tasmanian oak floor that provides a reflective surface. The linear curved sections in the works benefit from this reflective surface because the structures are so airy it adds to the visual appeal. The mirror quality also reinforces the balanced central axis and the plain white walls create minimal visual distraction from the work.



## **PART FIVE**

### **CONTEXT OF THE ARTWORK**

An earlier work, from 1998, forms a useful starting point for this section because a sculptural insight occurred while making it that has informed this project. The piece consisted of a 40cm brick ball sitting atop a curved wood slat support. Due to the heavy weight of the ball the support became redundant and later took on a character of its own as a sculptural object. Its *being* changed.

In particular the support structure now presented itself as itself, not as an adjunct to another, more important thing. Instead of being perplexed I became excited by the empty space, it was what was most powerful and interesting about that object. It was the point with unlimited potential, a potential that was to be forever postponed. I say this because its form seemed to indicate that something was meant to go there, but what that thing *was* was left unresolved.

It has provided a direction for my research to pursue, which has primarily entailed investigating methods of construction for light bent wood and the relationship that people form with these structures, which tend to indicate some purpose or use in their design. They are associated with containers or support structures and the term 'functional aesthetic' describes them.

One of the primary ways of relating to contemporary art has been in terms of communication. Art as a

means of communication, as a form of language, has undoubtedly been paramount in any serious discussion about recent art. In most critical reviews of student work through my undergrad days it was normal to ask, 'What is the artist trying to say with the work? Are they making a statement? Are they getting their idea across with the work? Is this material/medium suitable to communicate that idea?' It was and is still usual practice, in art institutions, to write down what you propose to do before you do it, and then later to compare what you have done with what you said you were going to do. It appeared to me that the language component of visual art had become a dominant factor in its production.<sup>20</sup>

I had a vague and perhaps naive idea that I could do something about this dominance, or at least investigate it. Initially it became an attempt to make art that did not attempt to say anything, to express anything. This, it was pointed out to me, was not possible, because all objects can be read in a meaningful way. But it occurred to me that the liberation was not one that belonged to the art object but to me as the artist. It was me who was not trying to use the object to say anything, it was a shift in intention that was required.

Another issue concerned Minimal and Post-Minimal sculpture. I was attracted to the bold presence of this work, particularly by Richard Serra, Robert Morris

<sup>20</sup> Susan Sontag's discussion in 'Against Interpretation' centres on this.

and Eva Hesse.<sup>21</sup> The idea, as Susan Sontag points out, that these artists were making work that did not represent but just existed influenced me greatly. I suppose that the theme of liberation is a recurring one with me and I saw an attempt at liberation occurring with these bold industrial looking objects. Liberation from the ancient tradition of sculpture representing the human form and of it representing mythical themes or themes from nature.

The primary issues for me here are: 1. If an artwork is representing something then it is acting as a sign and therefor it is dispensable, the artwork is devalued as a sign. 2. If the artist takes responsibility for the information communicated by the sign and thus must have some idea of the worth of that information, how do they know that it is of value?

Many forms of art practice - here I include any art that seeks to represent - tend to devalue the artwork and the artist by shifting attention on to what is being represented rather than the act of making or the thing made. The question arises; is it the role of artists to represent ideals, and if so, what ideals should they represent?

We live in a time of uncertainty, the spiritual nihilism of this technological age brings us to question all presumed ideals. Perhaps it was this uncertainty itself, the unfixed purpose of the sculptures, that was

<sup>21</sup> The work of Donald Judd however did not interest me, nor do the many Anthony Caro like works I have seen as public sculpture. The monotone painted metal sculptures that consist

emerging through the work I was doing that finally became revealed as being what was essentially relevant? Originally this Masters project was to be titled 'Art and Uncertainty - Ethics'. I dropped the direct reference to ethics but my personal ethical concerns remain. Particularly in relation to my activity as an artist making things to exist in the world, this reflects my choosing to bring these things forth and thus entails some responsibility for their existence, though not for their meaning, which is always a communal issue associated with language.

It was the question of what to make and why that led me to read Martin Heidegger in an attempt to understand something of the nature of things. I explain the significance of Heidegger in another section of this paper and so will not enter that discussion here other than to point out that it was as part of the unfolding sequence of the investigation that Heidegger arose.

The industrial aesthetic of Minimal sculpture awakened my memory of earlier days growing up in mining towns and later working in those industrial environments. Even though I no longer live there I still have an interest in the activities of the tradesperson who skilfully makes things happen. The pride that some people have in their work has stayed with me as a lesson in human dignity and pragmatism. The link between art and pragmatic making meets, for me, at the point where the structure, originally

primarily of aesthetically composed elements leave me cold because of their abstraction from the world.

designed for a pragmatic function, becomes released from that service into an existence as a thing that is here but not for any obvious purpose. Far from being pointless, ironically this thing does have a function and that is to be itself and thus awaken us to Being. However, different from Marcel Duchamp and his ready-mades, I love the activity of designing and making and so the release from service is an apparent one rather than actual. Another issue to raise here, in reference to Duchamp, is that my work does not primarily address the history of art in the way his work does. I am more concerned with philosophical, psychological and cultural issues such as alienation, truth and the relationship between the individual, the group and things in the world. Visual art is an appropriate means to explore these issues.

My structures have a 'functional aesthetic' and this sets up a tension between what they are, what they mean and what their purpose is. For the tension to exist a person must engage with the objects in an open-minded manner, in the sense of a questioning attitude, otherwise it is likely they will not engage at all. The objects themselves can help to create this kind of viewer by drawing the person in with a sense of familiarity and then, upon closer inspection or further reflection, presenting as unfamiliar or unknown (In German *unheimlich*). The aim is to make objects that seem to be usual or ordinary but are also anomalies, this causes us to question their being, their place. Of course artworks in general serve to engage the viewer in a questioning but usually this questioning takes the form of a questioning of representation, story or

meaning. This would be to engage with them epistemologically while I am more interested in an ontological questioning of being.



**Wooden pipeline at  
Laughing Jack Lagoon, Tasmania.**

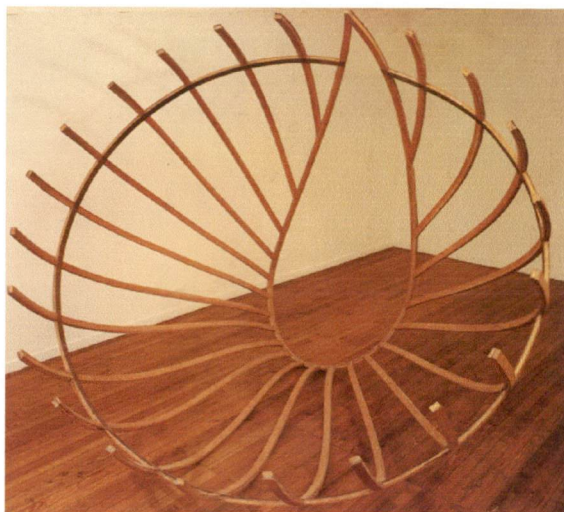
The physical environment of Tasmania, in particular the built environment, has influenced the way I make things. I have been inspired by traditional ways of working with wood and metal, in particular coopering, but also bridge building, farm buildings and the wooden pipelines of central Tasmania.



**Barn near Ouse in Tasmania.**

What constitutes an interesting object? For some objects it is the nature of their physical being that interests, such as the incredibly smooth and consistent surface of polished marble, or the intricacy and abundance of detail in the golden decorative patterns of a Buddhist temple. For others it is historical association such as Duchamp's first ready-mades or Ned Kelly's armour. And for other objects it is the quality of their construction and the perfection or imperfection of their form to function ratio that is interesting, here cars may serve as example. Because I am engaged in designing and making sculptural objects that are ambiguous I cannot rely on the historical association, but let me add that it is common Post-Modern practice to borrow historical leverage from objects that do have that aura of poignancy. I choose not to borrow from those objects because for this technique to work the association must be recognisable and this would lead the viewer to the natural conclusion that the work must somehow be about that thing. I do not wish for my artwork to point away from itself to another thing.

Now I would like to introduce some of the artists who have had a direct impact upon the development of this Masters research.



*Untitled* 1980 Richard Deacon

Image from Biggs.

H.3m.W.2.89m.D.2.89m.

Laminated Wood.

## ***RICHARD DEACON***

The artist whose practice appears closest to my current research is the British sculptor Richard Deacon. It was while reading an essay titled "Richard Deacon and the End of Nature" by Michael Newman in *Interpreting Contemporary Art*, that I noticed a photograph of one of his sculptures that resembled what I had been doing. It was 'Untitled' 1980 and it consisted of about 20 bent laminated wooden boards shaped to form an opening that resembled a teardrop. Its construction was light and minimal, it was more of a definition of space than an object occupying space.

What interested me was that it resembled some of my work. There were so many similarities that I felt compelled to find out more about Richard Deacon. I had also studied a unit in Continental Philosophy at UWA. So it came as a double surprise to discover that



the subject of the essay was the connection between Richard Deacon's work and the philosophy of art developed by Heidegger. The connection seemed too tempting to ignore and so I chose to find out more about both of them in an attempt to discover more about what I was doing.

I suspect, from looking at Deacon's early work that he may have been making decisions along similar lines to me. I use salvaged wood cut into long thin strips, which I bend and laminate together and then join to form light airy structures. This is a practical way to make a sculpture that appears large and yet is light and easily transportable and is also cheap. It does require access to some woodworking machines but other than that the process is fairly simple. This way of working also brings to mind early manufacturing industries with an emphasis on repetitive construction processes. Newman points out that the techniques Deacon uses employ hands on rather than automated manipulation, which emphasise the object's 'hand-made' quality and the uniqueness of the finished article.<sup>22</sup>

In an interview with Pier Luigi Tazzi Deacon says that early on in his exhibiting career he became aware of the power of the gallery space to help make the art.<sup>23</sup> He seems to say this in the sense that some of his works, if placed outside the gallery, would not function as art objects. Perhaps it could be the

<sup>22</sup> Newman. p. 183

<sup>23</sup> Tazzi. p. 9

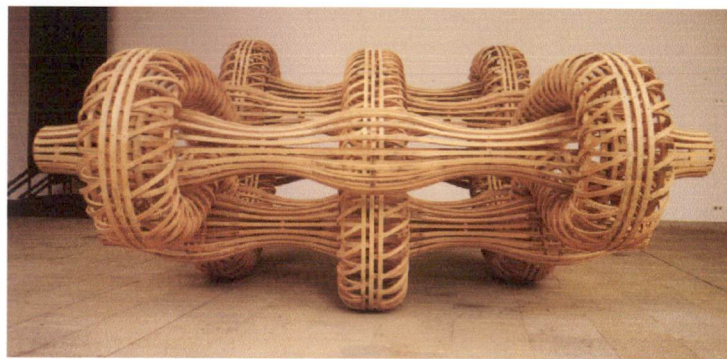
industrial aesthetic he employs that leads to this conclusion? However tension then arises through the problem of the object - what is it? It seems that Deacon explored the issue of how location changed the reading of artworks in a number of shows in the mid-eighties in Paris and London in which he designed indoor and outdoor pieces. He goes on to say that he wanted to create an ambiguity that arises from the obvious disclosure of the physicality of the work - the glue oozes out of the cracks, the screws are explicit - and the uncertainty of meaning.

It is the act of human consciousness that stimulates much of Deacon's work and thus his work relies heavily upon language, in particular the titles. The ambiguous relationship between the titles and the sculptures to which they refer sets up a moment of confusion in logic, and it is this poetic element in Deacon's work that is especially interesting because the break in logic throws our pretensions to knowledge into focus. You know what the words mean and what the materials are, you can see how he has constructed the object, but you can't quite work out what they all mean together.<sup>24</sup>

The danger of working in this manner is its frivolity. The work must convince the viewer that it is worth engaging with, that it is of some value and not just a jumble of chance elements. Deacon achieves this partly through a work ethic and partly through the materials themselves. The obvious labour that has

<sup>24</sup> Thompson. p.47

gone in to making his pieces cannot be denied and the methodical pragmatism of the lines of rivets or screws speaks of function and purpose. The materials he uses, particularly after the early eighties, are not throwaway items. For example he tends to use sheet aluminium, beechwood, beaten copper or stainless steel as opposed to the laminated cheaper wood and galvanised steel of his earlier work. The materials themselves suggest gravity or at least a sense of commitment to longevity.



***What Could Make Me Feel This Way A***

Richard Deacon 1993

Image from Thompson

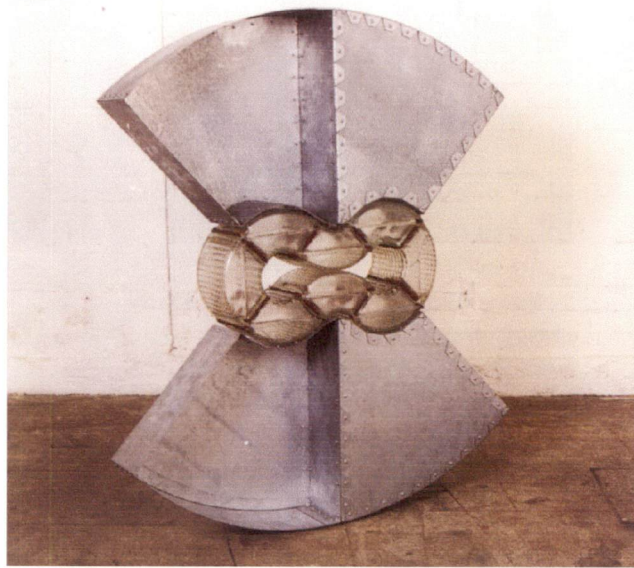
H.2.86m.W.5.6m.D.4.83m. Wood, Screws, Cable.

The other element of Deacon's work that is interesting to discuss is the use of skill. This suggests the development over time of knowledge and abilities that gather value through scarcity. The longer one works at developing a skill the better one gets at it and the less ordinary the products of that skill. Obviously this is the case with music and musicians where practice is a sure way to develop an ever-refined performance and dexterity. It is the cornerstone of craft where it is the witnessing of a rare skill and care in the work that often delights. There is great evidence of a skilful hand at work upon looking at Deacon's

intricate and well-made objects, in spite of his choice to occasionally over-glue or leave rough edges.

With Deacon's work we are occasionally astonished by the sheer complexity of the structure. We wonder with *"What Could Make Me Feel This Way A"* (1993) how anyone could possibly make such a thing and then, later, how could anyone possibly design it? It is preposterous that it exists and because it exists, we know someone has either made it or had it made. It serves, in Heidegger's terms, as an *opening* or *clearing* in that it opens up new space for itself, a space that was not there before. It is an addition to the world, not a sign within it.

In the early eighties Deacon made a series of works called *"Art for Other People"*. It consists of at least 28 small sculptural objects, not larger than 1.6 metres in any dimension, that are made out of materials like linoleum, suede, vinyl, galvanised steel, marble and brass. Most consist of only two or three materials and they are presented as being ground based. Many of them offer an opening or two and an inside and thus an outside. They appear to hover somewhere between the organic and the human designed in shape and yet they are obviously constructed objects. There is a tension that arises from the recognition of elements and the persistent ambiguity of the whole.



***Art for other People. No 22.* Richard Deacon. 1986.**

**Image from Thompson. H.1.05m.W.1.05m.D0.15m.**

**Glass, Galvanized Steel, Screws.**

This ambiguity is further enhanced by the title of the works..."*Art for Other People No 22*", for instance. This gives you no useful clue as to what they could be other than to tell you that they are art and they are part of a series. The idea of a series of objects wonderfully creates a perverse sense of purpose to them that is not there for the single work. They each do suggest that they might indeed be purposeful due to their materials, their shape and their facture, however they also almost at the same time register as impractical for any activity that I can think of.

These works are obviously pieces of contemporary sculpture. They have a poetic element that is present in most of Deacon's work that brands them as sculptures and not things you would long mistake for other 'real' things. It is the curved line that is present

in most of his work that creates this sense of poetic art-ness to them, as well as the harmonising formal relationships of mass and colour, inside and outside, surface textures and relationship to the ground. They mostly, as with all his works, touch the ground lightly on a curved edge creating a sense of lightness and the poise of an object that could move. In this sense Deacon is a sculptor working with sculptural concerns. It is his experimental use of new, modern, unusual materials, often loaded with prosaic associations, that indicates that the work is contemporary, as well as the abundance of abstract form.

We attempt to draw forth meaning from his works via a number of routes. Firstly there are the materials, then the manufacturing processes, the scale, the overall form, the relationship between parts, the titles and the relationship with the surrounding environment. It is the complex interplay of these factors that lends his artworks their enigmatic and yet prosaic character. The tension thus created imbues his work with a presence that tempts us to try and understand them.

His latest work, shown in Dundee, Scotland in early 2001, shows a return to his earlier and rougher aesthetic. However the work is more complex than before in terms of number of elements and it is more of an installation of varied yet similar forms than the single and unique objects of his past. The new work shows direct reference to the steam bending process



he has employed to suit the wave/marine theme of that show.



*UW84DC*. 2001. Richard Deacon.

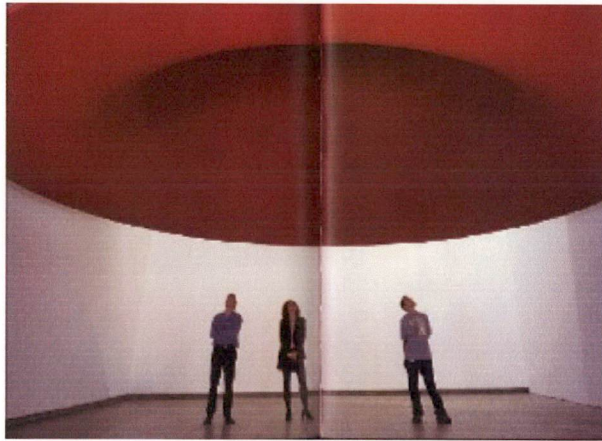
Image from Bell. Wood, Screws.

## **ANISH KAPOOR**

Anish Kapoor is associated in time and space with Richard Deacon, both being British artists who came to prominence in the 1980s. The sheer beauty of Kapoor's work is perhaps its most engaging attribute but a close second is the sense of enigma that pervades his often colourful sculptures. The sense of simplicity in his works is at odds with the, as reported to me, overwhelming feeling of awe, wonder and even intimidation they evoke.

I have experienced Kapoor's group of rocks with deep black holes at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I found that it was the nature of the rock that provided the sense of awe and wonder when I peered into the seemingly endless black holes within. It was my knowledge of stone and my expectations of it as a

material that initiated the sense of surprise at finding them empty inside yet solid and heavy on the outside.



*At the Edge of the World..* 1998.

Anish Kapoor. Image – Bhabha.

H 500cm.W 800cm.D 800cm.

Fibreglass, Pigment.

“It may be the most valuable insight into Anish Kapoor’s work to suggest that the presence of an object can render a space more empty than vacancy could ever envisage,”<sup>25</sup>

The reason I choose to include Kapoor in this section is the empty space often found in his works. It is this emptiness that is important to most of my works where it does not so much refer to as embody the concept of *Earth* in Heidegger. This is the before human knowledge aspect of the world, the primordial base of being and existence. Kapoor presents this empty space to us as part of his cultural, Hindu, endowment. I present it as arising primarily from a European Existential, Nietzschean, endowment.

<sup>25</sup> Bhabha.H. **Anish Kapoor**, p.12.



The simple beauty and presence of Anish Kapoor's work is poetic in nature in that the forms are ambiguous enough for us to draw many readings from them and yet familiar enough for us to engage with them due to his interest in Jungian archetypal forms. The Earth or Unknown can be intimidating to a person who has lived always within the bounds of an Epistemological society where knowledge is the supreme value. The most surprising and impressive thing for me about Kapoor is his ability to engage the viewer with the nothingness he presents. I admire this in his work and aspire toward his lean poetics.

## **MARTIN PURYEAR**

Martin Puryear also came to prominence in the 1980s but he comes from America, not Britain. Puryear acquired his impressive making skills through studying formally and informally both at university (Yale) and in the workshops of indigenous craftspeople. It is his flawless finished works that speak clearly of his enviable ability to make well-crafted sculptural objects that appear as if they were always meant to be.

The unusual juxtaposition of Western and indigenous methods of making structures invests his work with a tension that exceeds the mere physical stress of his frequently bent wooden objects. They often appear to sit uncomfortably within the pristine gallery space carrying with them unshakeable signs of their earthy origins. Their sense of strangeness is not industrial like Deacon's, nor is it immense and void-like as

Kapoor's work is, but it seems to me to be an out of place and time element that evokes the unfamiliar. As has been said of Deacon's work it may be the curved forms that bristle against the 'rectilinear' shape of the white modernist gallery.<sup>26</sup>



*Bower.* 1980. Martin Puryear

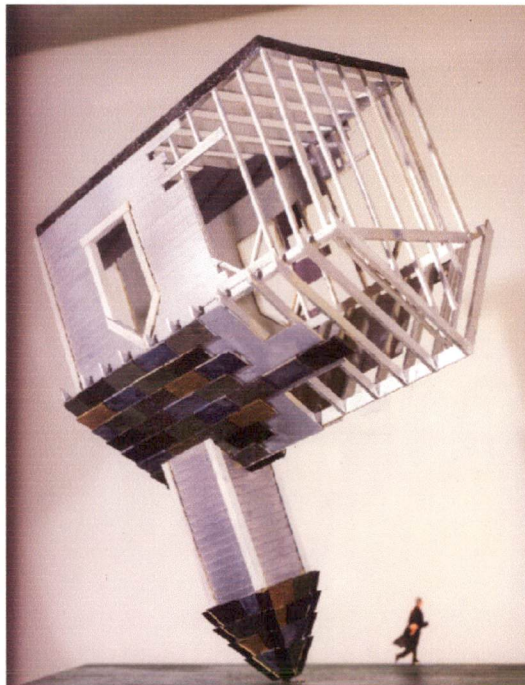
Image from Benezra.

H.64in.W.94in.D.26in. Pine, Sitka Spruce.

Puryear, like Deacon and Kapoor, also often presents an empty space within his work, although he regularly also introduces a long thin drawn out

<sup>26</sup> Newman, p 186.

aesthetic as well. His empty spaces cannot be entered; they are closed off. They are however human sized and so we can metaphorically project ourselves into them and so place ourselves within the archaic. We can step outside of our world into the other world inside his sculptures, this world is a slow, earthy, hand-built one that may contain traces of a Romantic longing for an idealised past. However it is the effective description of space that Puryear evinces which lifts his works well beyond any nostalgic restrictions.



*Device to Root Out Evil.*

Dennis Oppenheim. 1996.

Image from Celant.

H.22ft.W.9ft.D.18ft.

Structural Iron, Perforated Iron, Aluminium, Glass,  
Rubber, Electric light, Concrete.

## DENIS OPPENHEIM

It was Dennis Oppenheim's sense of humour that first attracted me. He is a very eclectic artist and only some of his work is visually similar to mine. However it is his witty use of titles that gave me an insight into the titling of my own work. He is an American artist who has been working with sculpture since the mid-1960s.

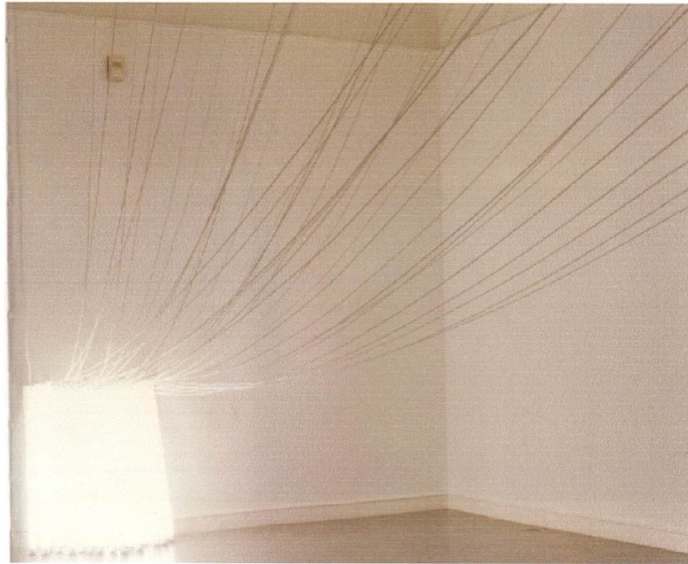
*'Device to Root out Evil'*, is the work that had the greatest influence here. Many of my works are called devices. With this work of Oppenheim's it is the title that makes the work. Without the title we would be confronted with an upside down building in the style of a small wooden church. With the title the work raises issues regarding the function of a church. As a device art becomes a thing with a purpose rather than merely a thing to be admired for its aesthetic qualities.

"Nothing is offered calmly, everything is loaded with tension and aggression – it is to be taken in, digested and filtered,... as the macroscopic evidence of a crisis in the relations between things and beings, between words and images."<sup>27</sup>

"Using the relation between things and titles with openly ironic and critical intent..." Oppenheim confuses and amuses the viewer.<sup>28</sup> His use of contemporary materials and mechanically mobile structures brings them closer to the real than my

<sup>27</sup> Celant. p. 12.

work, which is a little out of time. However I believe the fun aspect of his art can work against the public engaging deeply with it. The work can remain at the level of amusement where it does not, according to Adorno, perform any critical function.<sup>29</sup>



*Raum 9 – Der Herzraum.* Simone Mangos 1995

Image from Maloon.

### SIMONE MANGOS

The image above is of an installation that consists of the removal of the overhead fluorescent lights from the ceiling to the floor. The cables have been extended to maintain the power source.

Simone Mangos is an installation artist who works toward creating poetic situations. She often creates places of ambiguous and unresolved meaning that remain poignant through their careful construction. Mangos is clear that she does not wish the materials

<sup>28</sup> Celant p.12

she uses, for example honey, to be read in a metaphoric way. "There is no intention to delimit and fix the meanings of things into a system of metaphorical correspondences."<sup>30</sup>

"Her installations are conceived as a source of emergent meanings, a ground of meaning, a threshold of meaning, a skeletal structure that provides an armature to be mentally fleshed-out with a volumetric abundance of proliferating meaning, a cross roads that invites and reconciles differences of meaning."<sup>31</sup>

It is the desire for the poetic opening of imaginative consideration that provides the contextual link between what I am doing and what Mangos does. I find her desire to avoid specific symbolic reference, while still using potentially symbolically loaded materials, to correlate with my artistic aims.

## CONCLUSION TO CONTEXT.

These artists have all moved beyond the strictures of Minimalism. Yet they have all profited from the ground won for art, in particular sculpture, by the theoretical battles waged by the early Minimalist artists such as Donald Judd. This ground was something like a plowed field, open and ready for something new but with a strong linear structure in place. They have all broken the rectilinear furrows of

<sup>29</sup> Menke ch.1

<sup>30</sup> Maloon. p. 12

early Minimalist practice to introduce a more organic line into their work.

They have also introduced the personal element into their work which was purposely absent from the work of the Minimalists who usually contracted people to make their sculptures for them using industrial processes. The smaller scale hand-crafted element is attractive to me because it is the alienation from not only the means of production but also the materials themselves that is one of the problems of the modern industrialised world that I wish to address.

It is also the sense of emptiness inherent in their work that attracts me. The lack of any clear conceptual statement, narrative or representation within the work provides the viewer with an opportunity to experience the work itself, as the thing that it is. The viewer can draw their conclusions from their response rather than to feel impelled to decode the signified message offered in much of the work of many of their contemporaries.

<sup>31</sup> Maloon, p. 8

## **PART SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

At the heart of this research project is a concern with our current cultural situation. I followed an initial intuition that something was wrong, for me, with the received paradigm of art as communication. This led me to discover a large body of philosophical work regarding the problematic nature of the progress of Western civilisation. Martin Heidegger became my major reference because he addresses this issue through a discussion of the important place that art has in our culture.

The act of attempting to make a watertight cask in the traditional manner led me to research local historical references to coopering by visiting the Cascade Brewery and making inquiries locally about retired coopers. I also made contact with a working cooperage in France (Tonnellerie Doreau) regarding a possible visit to gain insights into contemporary professional coopering practices. Although I was initially interested in coopering only to learn how to make curved wooden forms, the outmoded nature of the craft of coopering awoke an interest in the cultural significance of the loss of traditional object making skills.

Through researching outmoded practices such as coopering in a very physical way, I came to adopt an alternative position in regard to a perceived loss of craft skills in sculpture. Through rejecting the image as a means to



communication I have adopted a stance that enables me to make artworks that address fundamental ontological issues; issues that are lost through the usual channels of information transfer. When artworks are assimilated as information for knowing, they become irretrievably confined to the epistemological way of relating. My work resists this confinement through disrupting the usual modes of coherent knowledge acquisition. It does this through initially presenting an object as a familiar form, but one that becomes transformed into a *thing*. It exists but we have no place or category for it to go. Thus the work exerts its presence, but not its purpose.

I have played on this issue by giving the title *Device ...* to many of the works. The actual work that these devices do is to raise the issue of our ontological relationship with things.

All of the works have employed traditional woodworking techniques as well as other hand manufacturing skills. Only the late work exhibits a coopered form because it took most of the two years to develop the technique to a level where I felt happy with the finished product. My intention was that the manner of making would lend to the sculptures a quality that would engage viewers so that they would address the thing itself, rather than what the thing might represent.

I established a theoretical background for my practice through Heideggerian philosophy and a link with the Surrealist conception of 'the outmoded'. This framework enabled me to work with confidence toward a more refined way of making sculptures that raise ontological questions. I

am keen to develop further outmoded skills such as wheelrighting in order to find other ways to create sculptures that bring our historical development to the fore as a relevant issue for consideration. This activity is a response to the rapid development of the postmodern world. I am concerned that in recent times the domination of information and communication as cultural phenomena may have negative consequences for our relationship with the physical world. Heidegger points out that the most apparent symptom of this faulty relationship is when we apprehend things solely as a resource for our present or future use.

I believe the research has enabled me to make artwork that has been successful in permitting the viewer to confront the sculpture as a thing. This relationship can work to ameliorate their alienation from the physical world. The sculptures have become things that create openings where the, usually concealed, act of determining the meaning of an object becomes explicit.

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